

DOJ Charges More Than 14,200 Defendants With Firearms-Related Crimes In 2020

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FAIRVIEW HEIGHTS – This week, the Department of Justice announced it has charged more than 14,200 defendants with firearms-related crimes during Fiscal Year (FY) 2020, despite the challenges of COVID-19 and its impact on the criminal justice process.

In the Southern District of Illinois, 93 people were charged with gun crimes – an increase of over 34 percent from last year and the district's highest annual total over the past five years. Firearms cases have been a Department priority since November 2019, when Attorney General William P. Barr announced his commitment to investigating, prosecuting, and combatting gun crimes as a critical part of the Department's anti-violent crime strategy.

The significant number of charges announced this week are the result of the critical law enforcement partnership between United States Attorneys' Offices and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

“The number one priority of government is to keep its citizens safe,” said Attorney General Barr. “By preventing firearms from falling into the hands of individuals who are prohibited from having them, we can stop violent crime before it happens. Violating federal firearms laws is a serious crime and offenders face serious consequences. The Department of Justice is committed to investigating and prosecuting individuals who illegally buy, sell, use, or possess firearms. Reducing gun violence requires a coordinated effort, and we could not have charged more than 14,000 individuals with firearms-related crimes without the hard work of the dedicated law enforcement professionals at the ATF, our U.S. Attorneys’ Offices across the country, and especially all of our state and local law enforcement partners.”

“Protecting the public from violent crime involving firearms is at the core of ATF’s mission,” commented ATF Acting Director Regina Lombardo. “Every day the men and women of ATF pursue and investigate those who use firearms to commit violent crimes in our communities, many of whom are prohibited from possessing firearms from previous convictions. ATF, in collaboration with the U.S. Attorneys’ Offices across the nation, is committed to bringing these offenders to justice for their egregious and violent criminal acts.” According to statistics collected by the Justice Department, the Southern District of Illinois charged more gun-related crimes in FY2020 than it had in any of the previous five years. Out of 108 matters opened during the year, charges were filed against 93 defendants, representing 86 separate cases. Of those 93 defendants, 40 were charged with using a firearm in connection with a crime of violence or a drug trafficking offense. These cases involve defendants who have used and sometimes discharged a firearm during the commission of a robbery or a carjacking or used the firearm to further their drug distribution. A conviction for brandishing or discharging the firearm in these cases carries some of the most serious penalties under federal law, including a mandatory minimum term of 7 or 10 years and up to life imprisonment.

A defendant who commits a series of these firearm offenses, such as a string of armed robberies or carjackings, will be sentenced to mandatory consecutive terms of imprisonment for each offense.

“Every day, we are working with our law enforcement partners to combat violent crime in the Metro East and throughout Southern Illinois,” U.S. Attorney Weinhoeft said. “When a gun is involved, we can often leverage federal firearms laws to prosecute and detain some of the most dangerous criminals in this district. Many of these prosecutions are the direct result of outstanding work by the Great Lakes Fugitive Task Force, and I especially want to thank the United States Marshals Service for their tremendous leadership and support in tracking down and apprehending these offenders.”

Led by the United States Marshals Service for the Southern District of Illinois, the Great Lakes Fugitive Task Force includes members from ATF, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), Illinois State Police (ISP), St. Clair County Sheriff's Office, Belleville Police Department, Effingham County Sheriff's Office, and East St. Louis Police Department. In FY20, the Task Force continued to concentrate its efforts on the most dangerous criminals in the Southern District of Illinois, arresting 60% of the district's priority violent offenders and seizing a record high 272 firearms and over 100,000 rounds of ammunition.

"It has been my great privilege to assist in assembling one of the finest fugitive task forces in the United States," said U.S. Marshal Brad Maxwell. "The commitment by our partner agencies has shown their dedication to doing everything possible for the people of Southern Illinois. Each of our partner agencies truly has dedicated some of their finest officers, agents and deputies to ensure success."

Twenty-three men arrested by the Task Force are currently under indictment in the Southern District of Illinois awaiting trial on felon-in-possession charges. Under federal law, it is illegal to possess a firearm if you fall into one of nine prohibited categories, including being a felon, an illegal alien, or an unlawful user of a controlled substance. It is also unlawful to possess a firearm in furtherance of a drug trafficking offense or violent crime, or to purchase firearms for a prohibited person. Lying on ATF Form 4473 (used to lawfully purchase a firearm) is also a federal offense.